Coaching for Collaborative Autonomy: A Reflection on an Inter-university Course

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- As part of a project focusing on language coaching, a team of European HE teachers and educators organized an online course built around collaboration and co-creation.
- The inter-university course was open to thirty-five international bachelor and master students asking them to produce outputs related to sustainability and product marketing to develop their language and transversal skills online.
- Working in culturally heterogeneous multi-disciplinary student teams presupposes a good deal of collaborative autonomy as well as the ability to give and receive non-directive feedback.
- Reflecting on the collaborative process through Learning Journals and coaching tools facilitated the development of collaborative autonomy and cross-cultural inter-dependent learning.

Introduction

To remain relevant beyond the Covid-19 pandemic, HE institutions need to reflect on their approaches to Digital Education and effectively complement the newly reinvented educational environments. Teaching online does not just change teaching and learning but offers opportunities to transform teachers from transmitters of knowledge into co-creators, facilitating collaborative learning as coaches, mentors and evaluators (Richardson, 2003).

Aiming to fortify collaborative autonomy in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) learning and teaching, a European team of researchers have been developing interdisciplinary, collaborative, coach-oriented language teaching tools, methods and resources as part of Erasmus+ project CORALL. The CORALL project is a transnational initiative developed as a strategic partnership to support students in becoming effective multi-cultural collaborators, and well-oriented, reflective and inter-dependent learners. It also informs HE teachers on how to harness coaching skills to develop students' autonomous language and transversal skills online, whilst encouraging students' reflection about the learning process (Kleppin & Spänkuch, 2012). This chapter discusses how a team of European HE academics and educators organized an online course built around collaboration and co-creation to develop students' skills such as cross-cultural communication and critical collaborative autonomy.

Coaching and Collaboration

The CORALL project is a cross-European project, with many different partners/ partner institutions. The CORALL team organized a nine-week inter-university collaborative course KREA (an abbreviation derived from a Scandinavian word for creativity, *kreativitet*) inviting thirty-five international bachelor and master students to participate. The course was integrated into students' language curricula, offering up to five ECTS credits, and was promoted among the students of partnering universities as a unique opportunity to collaborate and network internationally whilst practising English in a multi-cultural academic/professional community. Interested students were selected based on their motivation letters.

In practice, the course participants collaborated to produce outputs related to sustainability and product marketing. Teams of four to five students were coached by international teacher-coaches who facilitated a dialogue with the intention to involve students in problem solving through effective questioning and listening. The coaches did not give directive feedback but used specific coaching tools – e.g. questioning, mirroring, journaling, framing – to facilitate students' collaborative journey. The teachers came from subjects including marketing, project management, and language teaching, and had been trained as coaches as part of the project. The aim was to develop students' critical collaborative autonomy, defined as the process of 'assuming control of one's language learning within a community' (Myskow et al., 2018, 361), whilst also making them reflect on the collaborative process, and learn from it.

Collaboration as the Cog in the Engine of Team Performance

The course responded to current issues of sustainability and aimed at developing collaboration where students co-constructed meaning as members of a group (Kesser & Bikowski, 2010). Collaboratively, student teams focused on sustainability challenges of chocolate production by co-creating digital marketing solutions (Instagram Story videos) to inspire sustainable consumer purchasing decisions. As the course featured culturally heterogeneous multi-national teams, effective collaboration was of utmost importance.

Although students recognized the importance of collaboration in the co-creation process, some were reluctant in certain circumstances. One of the issues that surfaced was breaking the myth that getting input from people automatically means reaching a consensus. This was addressed by emphasizing that team collaboration is more about pursuing new ways of working and developing ideas and different perspectives to gain better/shared solutions and to learn from one another.

The course supported collaborative behaviour in the strong belief that a team's success or failure at collaborating reflects the philosophy of its leaders (Gratton & Erickshon, 2017). Here the proposition is that professional teams do well when leaders invest in supporting social relationships, demonstrate collaborative behaviour

and create a 'gift culture' in which trainees experience interactions with leaders and colleagues as something valuable and generously offered – a gift.

Below we will focus on strong learning moments that were frequently reflected upon in the participants' Learning Journals and should be of interest to educators planning similar collaborative projects.

Collaboration, Autonomy and Learning Journals

Collaborative learning presupposes some degree of learner autonomy, especially when it comes to the type of autonomy which allows 'speakers' to interact within a group (Myskow et al., 2018). Learning languages involves students in some sort of collaboration, thus here, autonomy in learning does not equal learning individually. Therefore, the course focused on four key principles of collaborative autonomous learning: maximum peer interactions, equal opportunities to participate, individual accountability and positive interdependence. The teacher-coaches helped teams feel comfortable in the culture of their learning environment through socializing, facilitating collaborative choices and observing each other's learning styles. While students examined how to use what they learnt to benefit the team and progress towards their shared goal, stepping beyond individual empowerment was important.

As journaling is generally recognized as an effective coaching tool promoting student autonomy (Langer, 2002; Ning et al., 2011; Veiene et al., 2020), students were encouraged to reflect on their experiences in Learning Journals (LJs), noting their reflection as autonomous learners and as members of a multi-cultural interdisciplinary team. This further scaffolded the sense of a community of learning and underscored the value of collaborative process and team dynamic.

Participants also received multiple rounds of strictly non-directive feedback from their teacher-coaches, further fostering collaborative co-creation and partnering between lecturers and students. Students' LJs thus became a linchpin of collaborative autonomous learning by reflecting, engaging students in observation, speculation and awareness-raising, especially in relation to collaboration and their status as language speakers and learners.

Upon securing an agreement of all involved students, we analysed the challenges reported in the LJs to understand the role of learner autonomy in collaboration within online interdisciplinary teams in more detail. Key findings were shared and discussed with the students during the last course session.

Collaboration and Evaluation

The coaches' experience and the participants' LJs revealed takeaways which are crucial for anyone planning a collaborative project with a constructivist mindset. From the socio-cultural perspective (Oxford, 2003, 2015; Sudhershan, 2012), the students seemed to agree that the experience made them realize that autonomous collaboration

is a complex dynamic process and that the non-directive feedback they received allowed them to reveal and tackle their own attitudes to collaboration, collaborative successes and related frustrations. They also realized that non-directive feedback requires their active reflection in order to help them in their effort – this coaching dialogue needs to be engaged prior to (if possible) and throughout any collaboration. Our experience thus confirms the principles of the multi-disciplinary teaming model (Edmondson & Harvey, 2018, 347–60) which demonstrates that multi-disciplinary collaborations tend to work as a complex adaptive system, allowing collaborators to go beyond traditional systems thinking.

Both students and teacher-coaches learnt that working collaboratively presupposes collaborative autonomy and that bottlenecks emerging in collaborative settings – including shyness to communicate, express thoughts or feelings, and a lack of knowledge and trust in the power of an individual to drive change – can be best mitigated through collaborative effort. Awareness of these bottlenecks is of key importance to educators planning collaborative projects.

To address these issues, teachers planning to work with students collaboratively and/or as coaches need to motivate both individual students and student teams by providing supportive yet non-directive feedback and by encouraging reassuring peer feedback, creating an atmosphere of critical collaborative autonomy 'characterised not by independence but by interdependence' (Little et al., 2002, 7).

To promote collaborative autonomy, teacher-coaches have to clearly frame student/teacher roles and be very clear about what they can and cannot do – not giving directive feedback might surprise many students. However, they should be directive when explaining the conditions and/or rules of the collaboration, for instance, explain what happens if one of the team members drops out or actively encourage peer feedback, but remain strictly non-directive in providing feedback on the students' work. With this sort of clarity, a good deal of frustration on both sides can be avoided. These observations reflect the idea of 'autonomy-supportive teachers', who are ready and able to 'promote intrinsic motivation by understanding learners' perspectives' (Némethová, 2020, 154).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The CORALL project enabled the development of a unique nine-week inter-university collaborative course. The experiences collected throughout the course confirmed that collaborative work in intercultural interdisciplinary teams offers an opportunity to develop co-creativity and collaboratively innovate but also explains common lexis and the accuracy of communication. Making students individually and collaboratively reflect on their intercultural experience means making them aware of and appreciate positive cultural difference: people 'not only know different things, but also know things differently' (Dougherty, 1992, quoted in Edmondson & Harvey, 2018, 352); they may look at the same phenomenon and each see different opportunities and/or challenges. This repeatedly surfaced in project-related discussion groups and the follow-up

findings, including students' LJs. The project findings communicate important implications for educators who wish to embed coaching oriented collaborative autonomous learning in HE teaching during and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic, emphasizing the social and transformative character of collaborative autonomy, which 'not only transforms individuals, [but] also […] the social situations and structures in which they are participants' (Benson, 1996, 34; see also Benson, 2001).

Acknowledgements

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